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Council Asks Bush to Keep Landsats Aloft

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The White House's National Space Council voted unanimously to ask President Bush to reverse the policy of the past eight years and make a long-term commitment to keep land-sensing satellites of the Landsat system aloft.

The action will resolve "long-standing and contentious issues" over the satellites, an administration official said. Though the value of Landsat images has long been recognized, he said, "the satellites have been operated out of the Commerce Department, which doesn't use much of the data, and those who do use the data were unwilling to fund the operations [of the satellite system], while the OMB [Office of Management and Budget] was insisting that the satellites be commercialized immediately or terminated."

The two Landsats now in operation came within days of being turned off after 17 years of continuous recording of the state of the Earth's land and coastal waters. The Landsats have been producing 38,000 images a month and are the only satellites aloft that produce good images of the state of the world's forests and crops.

They have monitored the Soviet wheat crop, the burning of the Amazon, the effect of acid rain on northeastern forests and many other phenomena.

When the Reagan administration came into office, it declared that it would sell the satellites to private companies. But it has proved difficult to find a buyer and assure that the buyer could make a profit selling the pictures.

Now, a company called Eosat in Lanham, Md., is given all the pictures from the Landsats free by the government, and Eosat sells them. This situation was intended to continue until 1991, when Eosat has promised to start paying its own way.

But, the Reagan administration cut all funding for the satellites for fiscal 1989 and 1990.

In March, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which flies the satellites, decided to announce the shutdown of the system, in hopes that the administration would be forced to come up with the money to keep them operating.

The office of Vice President Quayle, who is head of the space council, responded by calling a number of agencies and getting at least temporary commitments of money to keep the data coming.

Now, the space council has made the rescue effort permanent.